DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 539 EC 303 171

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TITLE	Supporting Experienced and Beginning Teachers of Students with Disabilities.
PUB DATE	Mar 93
NOTE	17p.; Chapter 13 in: Billingsley, Bonnie S.; And Others. Program Leadership for Serving Students with Disabilities; see EC 303 164.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Role; Beginning Teacher Induction; Beginning Teachers; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; School Administration; *Social Support Groups; *Special Education Teachers; *Teacher Administrator Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Support Services

ABSTRACT

Administrative support is critical to the professional success and self-esteem of special education teachers. This chapter provides practical strategies for administrators at both the building and central office level to use to support special education teachers. J. S. House's framework is used for considering the different types of administrative support, which include emotional support, appraisal support, instrumental support, and informational support. Suggestions are offered for tailoring strategies associated with each of these types of support to the context of special education. These include accepting responsibility for the special education teaching staff, providing adequate working conditions for special educators, acknowledging the contributions made by special education teachers to their students' education, helping teachers work with the demands of their particular situation, providing an understanding and caring attitude toward students with disabilities, providing ongoing support for the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education, and supporting teachers who may be experiencing stress. Special support needs of beginning special education teachers are identified, and strategies for supporting them are also noted. (Contains 38 references.) (JDD)

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ED 372 539

Chapter 13

Supporting Experienced and Beginning Teachers of Students with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

Administrative support is critical to the professional success and self esteem of teachers (Rosenholtz, 1989). Teachers who characterize their administrators as supportive experience more career success (Chapman & Lowther, 1982), find work more motivating and satisfying (Rosenholtz, 1989), and, not surprisingly, demonstrate much lower attrition rates (Metzke, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989). Teachers who receive support from their administrators can also expect to experience less job-related stress and burnout (Zabel & Zabel, 1982), have fewer illnesses, and generally hold more positive work-related attitudes (Dworkin, 1987).

For a variety of reasons, special education teachers often do not receive the administrative support they need to be successful and feel good about their work (Breton & Donaldson, 1991; Fimian, 1986; Fimian & Blanton, 1986; Schetz & Billingsley, 1992; Tyler, 1987). For administrators, this lack of support generally is not intentional -- rather it arises from their not realizing that they have a major role to play in supporting special education teachers, and in not knowing what they can do to address the unique needs that special education teachers face in the workplace.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide practical strategies that administrators, at both the building and central office level, can use to support special education teachers. Because beginning special education teachers have more intense needs, which if left unmet often result in their leaving the profession, specific advice tailored to this group will also be given. This chapter addresses the following questions:

1. **What is support?**
2. **How can administrators support special education teachers?**
3. **What are some of the special support needs of beginning special education teachers?**
4. **What are some strategies for supporting beginning special education teachers?**

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1. WHAT IS SUPPORT?

Administrators are well aware of the numerous ways in which they support their general education teaching staff. On a daily basis, administrators are in a position to show emotional support through all of their interpersonal dealings. As a manager, they make available necessary resources and materials. In the role of instructional leader, administrators provide many professional growth opportunities for teachers ranging from information sharing to structured feedback. Many of these same support strategies are applicable to their special education teachers as well. The key in applying many of these support strategies is in understanding how certain aspects of the special education context influence teaching success.

House (1981) provides an excellent conceptualization for considering the different types of administrative support. In House's framework, administrators typically provide support in four areas: emotional, appraisal, instrumental, and informational. Following is a brief description of these four types of administrative support. The next section describes how administrators might tailor strategies associated with each of these types of support to the context of special education.

Emotional Support

When administrators relate to teachers by showing them that they are esteemed, trusted professionals and worthy of concern, emotional support is demonstrated. Of all of the types of support, emotional support is perhaps the most **important** to both general and special educators because it is at the core of positive working relationships (Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1992). Administrators who use emotional support are characterized by teachers as being approachable and friendly. Their actions include the following:

- Maintaining open communication.
- Considering the teacher's ideas.
- Communicating confidence in the teacher.
- Taking an interest in the teacher's work.
- Showing appreciation.
- Encouraging teacher input into decisions.
- Treating all teachers as valuable, contributing members of the faculty.

Appraisal Support

As instructional leaders, administrators are charged with personnel appraisal. When appraisal is viewed as an ongoing practice, one in which teachers are regularly provided with feedback about their work and given helpful information about what comprises effective performance, it can offer numerous opportunities for support. Administrators can provide appraisal support in the following ways:

- Give clear guidelines regarding job responsibilities.
- Offer frequent and constructive feedback.
- Provide standards for evaluating performance.

Instrumental Support

Administrators have a major responsibility for ensuring the smooth running of the school, and as such can directly contribute in a positive way to helping teachers with everyday work-related tasks and concerns. Administrators can demonstrate support in this way by

- Ensuring adequate time for teaching and non-teaching duties.
- Providing necessary materials, adequate space, and resources.
- Being available to help with managerial-type concerns.
- Orchestrate opportunities for teachers to problem solve and arrive at solutions for addressing work-related difficulties.

Informational Support

Facilitating professional development -- both long term and on a day-to-day basis -- involves providing teachers with useful information that they can use to improve their classroom practice. Whether it is setting up a peer coaching program, authorizing teachers' attendance at an inservice workshop, or talking over difficult classroom problems, administrators can use these opportunities to support their teachers. Administrators who provide informational support might

- Facilitate informal and formal sharing/collaboration opportunities among teachers.
- Offer practical information about effective teaching practices.

- Provide suggestions to improve instruction and classroom management dilemmas.

Using this support framework, administrators can expand their repertoire of strategies to address the needs of their special education teachers. The following sections provide illustrations of how administrators can support special education teachers and their work.

2. HOW CAN ADMINISTRATORS SUPPORT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS?

There are certain aspects of the special education context that require specialized administrator support and attention. Because special educators work in varied contexts, teachers' specific support needs will differ, depending on their levels of experience, their expectations, their settings, and the students they serve. The key, as with any teacher, is to identify the particular support needs and set up conditions to meet those needs. The following strategies provide some specific ways of supporting special education teachers.

Accept responsibility for the special education teaching staff.

Traditionally, special education has been viewed as a separate system. This "separateness" has resulted in many special education teachers feeling isolated and alone in their buildings. However, in recent years there has emerged a growing trend for administrators to acknowledge their responsibility for all students, including those with disabilities, and the teachers who serve them.

Emotional support can go a long way in eliminating this sense of separateness and isolation that many special education teachers feel. To help break this history of isolation, administrators might need, at first, to initiate frequent contacts. Administrators should periodically ask special education teachers what types of help they need, or ask them to respond to open-ended questions about their needs. Also, administrators should encourage teachers to tell them what they can do to help ease any problem situations.

Another way administrators can communicate acceptance and respect is through instrumental support. For example, administrators can make themselves available at meetings where the Individualized Educational Plan is developed and at child study team meetings, either in attendance or before/after for personal consultation with the teacher (Cherniss, 1988; Needle, Griffin, Svendsen, & Berney, 1980; Rosenholtz, 1989; Zielinske & Hoy, 1983). Some principals show their support of special education teachers and the work that they do by formally "dropping in" at parent conferences, where they take the opportunity to introduce themselves and pay tribute to the fine program that the special education teacher has established.

Finally, informational support can be particularly helpful. When there is a change in policy or guidelines affecting special education students or programs, do not assume that special education teachers have heard about it. Take time not only to communicate these types of changes, but also to discuss with teachers the practical implications of such changes. An excellent example is schoolwide discipline policies. Often special education students are affected, but seldom are their teachers involved in developing these policies -- which can prove to be a source of stress, especially in teachers of students with behavioral disorders (Pullis, 1992).

Provide adequate working conditions for special educators.

Adequate working conditions are important for positive morale and for doing one's job well. Administrators need to consider special education teachers as permanent school staff members and treat them like other staff by providing adequate space and necessary materials and resources (Cook & Leffingwell, 1982). Some special education teachers are split between buildings. For some of these teachers, their "official" office is located somewhere "downtown" in the central office, and they travel to schools to provide services. Too often, these teachers are expected to work wherever there happens to be space. If a special education teacher is split between two or more buildings, make use of instrumental support techniques. Reserve a space in each building for that teacher and ensure that it is maintained as that teacher's personal space. Leave standard memos and school announcements for the teacher, with an occasional personal note inviting the teacher to be a part of school "special" events.

Additionally, most special education teachers are required to perform non-teaching responsibilities such as attending mandated meetings, developing Individualized Educational Plans, completing official paperwork, and testing students, which often must be done at the convenience of others or at home (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Cook & Leffingwell, 1982). Instrumental support is needed for such tasks, as teachers still need time to prepare for instruction and actually teach. Special educators consistently identify too much paperwork as one of their major concerns, and as such, reducing unnecessary paperwork and meetings is an important form of support. The use of volunteers or substitute teachers may also be needed when workloads are particularly heavy.

Acknowledge the contributions made by special education teachers to their students' education.

For many students with special needs, progress is slow and infrequent. Unlike general education where certain learning milestones such as adding fractions and writing a complete sentence are present, a major learning milestone for a special needs student may not be quite so dramatic. Moreover, in the context of integration, too often the feedback to special education teachers on the student's performance is focused on the student's deficits, rather than on his or her accomplishments.

Emotional support in the form of acknowledgement and encouragement can provide that needed incentive to special education teachers to move forward. You can acknowledge the important contributions that special education teachers make to your school by taking time to notice what they do and by showing appreciation for their work.

Help teachers work with the demands of their particular situation.

Special educators can experience stress as a result of the pressures associated with working with difficult-to-teach students. A growing number of special education teachers are faced with violent and physically abusive students. Due to the intensity of characteristics of these students, a teacher might find that he or she must exert "constant supervision" throughout the day, leaving the teacher mentally and physically drained by the end of the day. Sometimes, just the sheer number of students or the wide range of ability levels represented in the classroom can result in the teacher feeling pressured.

Administrators can support special education teachers by understanding the unique composition of students in their classroom. When giving teachers feedback as part of appraisal support, make sure to dispel any unrealistic expectations. Sometimes, special education teachers need help seeing the objective reality -- they may not be able to reach all of the needs of all of their students by "tomorrow." If the teacher has a particularly challenging caseload, it might also be helpful to reduce extra-curricular duties. Pullis (1992) found that many special education teachers experience physical exhaustion just trying to keep up with all of the demands placed on them.

Finally, it is important to note that many special education teachers are forced to teach without adequate resources, which has been identified in the research as a situation underlying high levels of teacher exhaustion (Schmid, Schatz, Walter, Shidla, Leone, & Trickett, 1990). In the context of general education inclusion, special education teachers are often left without a set of textbooks, study guides, or other resources for helping their students succeed. As an administrator, make sure that teachers have the resources they need by including materials in the budget, requesting additional copies of teachers' manuals, and helping general education teachers see the importance of sharing materials. Additionally, copying equipment and secretarial support should be available in those instances where high priority materials are needed immediately.

Provide an understanding and caring attitude toward students with disabilities.

Unknowingly, some building administrators forget that their role as principal and school leader extends to those students with special needs. Emotional support directed at extending an open, caring attitude to students with disabilities reaps many benefits. Special education teachers remark how pleased they are when principals

interact positively with their students, call them by name, and even find special duties for them. In fact, there is a growing body of research documenting how the principal can serve as a positive factor in helping students with disabilities meet the demands of behavioral management contracts by showing interest and allowing time spent with him or her to constitute a "reward" for the child.

Provide ongoing support for the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education.

Administrators are important to integrating students with disabilities into general education programs. Leadership is needed to facilitate the coordination of services that results in the successful placement of students with disabilities in academic, vocational and extracurricular programs on regular school campuses (Burrello, Schrup, & Barnett, 1988). Facilitating the collaboration between general and special educators (Miller, 1990), as well as the teamwork required to fulfill these shared responsibilities, is particularly important. Administrators can draw on informational support techniques to facilitate this initiative by providing forums for discussion, involving teachers in planning collaborative approaches, and making training available.

Instrumental support can also be used to help ease some of the initial dis-ease with which new programs are implemented. For example, when a student is integrated, there is a great deal of "start-up" time needed for planning a smooth transition. Providing release time to the special and general education teachers to meet during school hours can greatly reduce the stress and possible feelings of resentment that arise when teachers are expected to meet after school hours or on their own time to undertake such planning.

Finally, it is important to note that many special education teachers do not have curricular training in all of the subjects in which their students might be integrated. Trying to accommodate the needs of their students in a number of subject areas for which they have little training may leave special educators feeling overwhelmed. Informational support helps ease much of the tension here, if it is directed in a positive rather than in a judgmental manner. Special education teachers can be invited to sit in on curriculum planning committee meetings with subject area teachers. Collaborative arrangements may be set up between a special education and general education teacher. It is important not to assign too many content area subjects to the special education teacher, as it is not realistic to expect one teacher to have mastery over all subjects in a given year or semester.

Support teachers who may be experiencing stress.

Stress leads to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and teacher attrition (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Blase, Dedrick, & Strathe, 1986; Dworkin, 1987). In light of this, supportive administrators need to recognize signs of stress and provide sources of revitalization and renewal outside of the classroom. For example, administrators might

encourage and assist in the formation of support groups to help teachers identify sources of stress (Beck & Gargiulo, 1983). Giving special educators an opportunity to discuss feelings and concerns will reduce problems of burnout (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986).

3. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIAL SUPPORT NEEDS OF BEGINNING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS?

Supporting beginning special education teachers is particularly important for several reasons. The first year of teaching is an intense experience for most teachers. Beginners are expected to perform the same tasks as experienced teachers even though they inevitably lack knowledge and preparation for many aspects of their roles. How beginners cope with early demands and uncertainties may determine whether they leave in the first years of teaching, as well as the kind of teachers they become (Nemser, 1983). Given the particular need to retain teachers in special education (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, et al. 1989), supervisory personnel need to identify strategies for improving the induction process.

General Concerns of Beginning Teachers

All teachers experience concerns about their work. Often, some of the same concerns are identified by both veteran and beginning teachers. What seems to distinguish the groups is the intensity of the concern and the amount of support that is required to foster success. Many of the concerns expressed by beginning special education teachers are also voiced by novice general education teachers. Both general and special educators identify concerns in the following areas (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Magliaro & Wildman, 1990; Veenman, 1984):

- Managing student behavior.
- Motivating students.
- Dealing with individual differences.
- Assessing students' instructional levels.
- Determining "what" and "how" to teach.
- Dealing with the emotional problems of individual students.
- Organizing for instruction.
- Working with parents.

- Managing time.
- Dealing with a heavy teaching load with insufficient preparation time.
- Having insufficient/inappropriate materials and resources.
- Being evaluated.

Concerns of Beginning Special Education Teachers

Beginning special education teachers experience additional concerns associated with their unique work situation. For example, special education teachers have reported that they have difficulty with (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Magliaro & Wildman, 1990)

- Understanding their roles.
- Setting realistic behavioral and academic expectations.
- Finding sufficient time to plan for individual differences.
- Writing IEPs.
- Collaborating with general classroom teachers.
- Working with paraprofessionals.
- Scheduling time with students.

Regardless of where the cause for these concerns lies -- inadequate preparation, the poor match between their preservice preparation and initial teaching assignments, unrealistic assignments, or inadequate support systems -- the reality remains that unless administrators can help relieve the pressures associated with many of these concerns, they run the risk of losing a future generation of teachers.

4. WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING BEGINNING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS?

Researchers and practitioners know that the first years of teaching may determine whether or not the person will stay in teaching and what type of teacher the person will become. Often, no structured support systems are available to help these beginners, so the amount and type of assistance received depends on the beginner's perceived needs, initiative, and persistence in seeking help (Billingsley & Tomchin,

1992). Unfortunately, many beginners may hesitate to report problems or ask for assistance since they often have a need to be viewed as competent and able (Corcoran, 1981).

When building a support system that addresses the concerns of beginning special education teachers, administrators can approach the task from two angles. First, there are the day-to-day strategies that administrators can use to respond directly to concerns as they arise. The second type is a more long-term approach in which more formal teacher development strategies are implemented.

Respond to Needs on a Daily Basis

The problems experienced by beginning special education teachers can be categorized as pedagogical, organizational, and special education-specific (Billingsley and Tomchin, 1992). As shown in Table 1, there are a number of ways that administrators can support novice teachers as they work through their concerns. Overall, to every extent possible, beginners' assignments need to be structured so that new teachers can spend their time as productively as possible. Beginners' job responsibilities should be carefully and deliberately planned so that they have opportunities to be successful. The most difficult assignments should be reserved for experienced teachers.

One of the most difficult tasks facing novice teachers concerns forming formal relationships with their peers. An important role of the special education teacher is to consult with general education classroom teachers. Although the basic logistics (e.g., scheduling) of collaborating can pose problems for the novice teacher, relationships can be put at risk when the novice is thrust into situations where either the general education teacher is not receptive, or where the general education teacher is a seasoned professional whose experience far surpasses that of the novice. Assessing training needs for collaboration and setting the stage so that collaboration occurs are necessary if the needs of students with disabilities are to be met.

Additionally, special education teachers may have difficulty supervising paraprofessionals. Interpersonal conflicts can occur, particularly if the aide has many years of experience and the beginner is insecure about his or her own performance. Some of these conflicts may be avoided if the beginner knows how to develop a relationship with the aide and establish expectations for the working relationship. The relationship should be enhanced if the teacher and aide agree on the functions of the aide (Frank, Keith, & Steil, 1988).

Develop a Teacher Induction Program

The most important activity for beginners is providing effective instructional programs for their students. However, in the first year, these teachers must not only

Table 1

Strategies for Addressing Beginning Special Education Teachers' Concerns

PEDAGOGICAL CONCERNS

Instructional Needs
- Limit the subjects beginners teach
- Provide mentors to assist in planning instruction
- Encourage teachers to reflect on teaching
- Conduct needs assessments periodically
- Provide staff development activities
- Provide information on assessing students' levels
- Provide curriculum guides/examples of lesson plans
- Allow beginners to observe other teachers
- Provide opportunities for beginners to collaborate

Material and Resources
- Order materials early to assure arrival by fall
- Provide list of materials used in previous year
- Survey beginners' needs during first weeks of school
- Allow beginners to 'borrow' from other classrooms
- Outline how to obtain instructional resources
- Schedule workshops for sharing materials
- Provide opportunities for beginners to develop and evaluate instructional material

Student Behavior
- Provide resources/alternatives for behavior management
- Provide mentors to assist with behavior management
- Provide inservice on managing behaviors

Teacher Evaluation
- Communicate purposes of formative and summative evaluations
- Provide opportunities to discuss evaluation systems
- Provide regular and systematic feedback to teachers

ORGANIZATION AND TIME CONCERNS

- Reduce responsibilities early in the year
- Provide additional planning days
- Provide orientation programs
- Provide clear job descriptions
- Provide calendar of IEPs and report deadlines
- Help teachers establish priorities
- Share time management/organizational tips with teachers

SPECIAL EDUCATION CONCERNS

Mainstreaming and Collaboration
- Assess training needs for collaboration
- Outline best practices for collaborating
- Have mentors model collaborative behaviors
- Provide time for collaborating with classroom teachers

Paraprofessionals
- Outline paraprofessional job description
- Provide guidelines for communicating with aides
- Outline best practices and procedures for working with paraprofessionals

Individual Education Plans
- Provide handbooks on IEP development
- Provide model IEPs
- Provide inservice on IEP development
- Prepare a video on how to develop IEPs
- Assign experienced teacher to help with IEP development

Scheduling Students
- Provide mentors to assist with scheduling
- Outline successful strategies and practices
- Provide examples of past schedules

Source: From "Four Beginning LD Teachers: What Their Experiences Suggest for Trainers and Employers" by B. Billingsley and E. Tomchin, 1992, Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 7, p. 111. Copyright 1992 by Springer International, (reprinted by permission).

engage in the daily activity of teaching, they must learn to teach at the same time (Wildman, Niles, Magliaro, & McLaughlin, 1989). Becoming an effective teacher is a complex endeavor and a support system is needed to help them in this learning process. Providing opportunities for beginners to receive feedback on their teaching and raise questions about teaching and learning should be primary goals of induction programs.

The use of peers as mentors and coaches has received a lot of attention over the last decade (Loucks-Horsley, Harding, Arbuckle, Murray, Dubea, & Williams, 1987; Wildman et al., 1989). Peers can function as a major source of support to novices, helping the beginner grow beyond the initial stages of survival and coping. Veteran teachers can help novice teachers cope with a number of challenges, ranging from learning about the procedural demands of school to learning new teaching strategies through observing in the veteran's classroom (Shulman & Colbert, 1987). One resource for facilitating the mentoring of novice teachers is A Mentor's Resource Guide for Working with New Special Educators (Magliaro, 1991).

An organizational environment that values collaboration and professional development is key to fostering collegiality among beginners and their experienced peers. Administrators can assist in the process by sanctioning the program, both in public statements and by providing resources such as release time and formal recognition. Additionally, since the goal of such programs is to facilitate information exchanges between the beginning teacher and the mentor, beginners need to have input into the program. A responsive induction program should consider the changing needs of new teachers over time and alter the nature of the support offered to encourage teaching expertise (Odell, 1987).

Resources for Beginning Teachers

Several handbooks are available for early career teachers. These handbooks provide teachers with important information regarding many aspects of teaching and identify specific strategies for coping with common problems. Two published handbooks that are written specifically for the special educator include: Survival Guide For the First Year Special Education Teacher (Carballo, Cohen, Danoff, Gale, Meyer, & Orton, 1990) and The Special Educator's HANDBOOK (Westling & Koorland, 1988). Another valuable resource is the Mentors' Resource Guide for Working With New Special Educators (Magliaro, 1991). Supervisory personnel may also want to develop their own orientation materials for special education teachers that includes critical information (e.g., who to contact for specific types of problems, local resources) and guidelines for the first year.

SUMMARY

Supporting special education teachers is an important aspect of an administrator's role. Taking time to listen to teachers and show appreciation for their efforts makes a difference in how teachers feel about their work and requires few resources. However, other types of support are also needed, such as providing adequate working conditions and assisting with specific problems.

There are a number of strategies that can be used to alleviate some of the needs and concerns of both experienced and beginning teachers. Administrators who acknowledge the vital role they play in supporting special education teachers can contribute to their teachers' lives, and in so doing, enhance the lives and education of the students who they serve.

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